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# LOCAL HEALTH MAPS: WHEN FUNDING FOLLOWS ILLNESS

## Where should public health departments allocate their limited resources to address the most pressing health issues?

The Polis Center, the Regenstrief Institute, the Indiana University (IU) Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health, and the Marion County Public Health Department have embarked on a project to help answer this question. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, this innovative method for using health data could change the way decisions are made by public health professionals.

The partners are working with electronic health records (EHRs) from health care systems to get a more accurate picture of the distribution of chronic health problems across Marion County. They are using socio-economic data from the SAVI Community Information System—a signature project of The Polis Center—to identify associated disparities and social risk factors.

In the past, health departments have relied on surveys for this information, which can be subjective and based on individual perception.

“Health records capture observed disease symptoms and, in aggregate, can reveal potential social and environmental issues we

need to address,” says Brian E. Dixon, lead investigator, of the Regenstrief Institute.

The goal is to help officials use new data to identify risk factors for individual communities and focus on the issues that will have the greatest impact on public health. Because Indiana’s county health departments have a finite level of funding and resources, more accurate data may allow public health professionals to see which neighborhood and communities are most affected by specific diseases so they can allocate their resources more effectively.

“Timely local information can help public health decision-makers identify disparities and high-risk groups, target interventions to appropriate populations, and evaluate programs,” says Karen Comer, Director of Health Geoinformatics at The Polis Center.

Dixon adds, “Before, health department staff could make a good guess, but this project explores the local data and makes it possible for them to take an evidence-based approach to their work.”

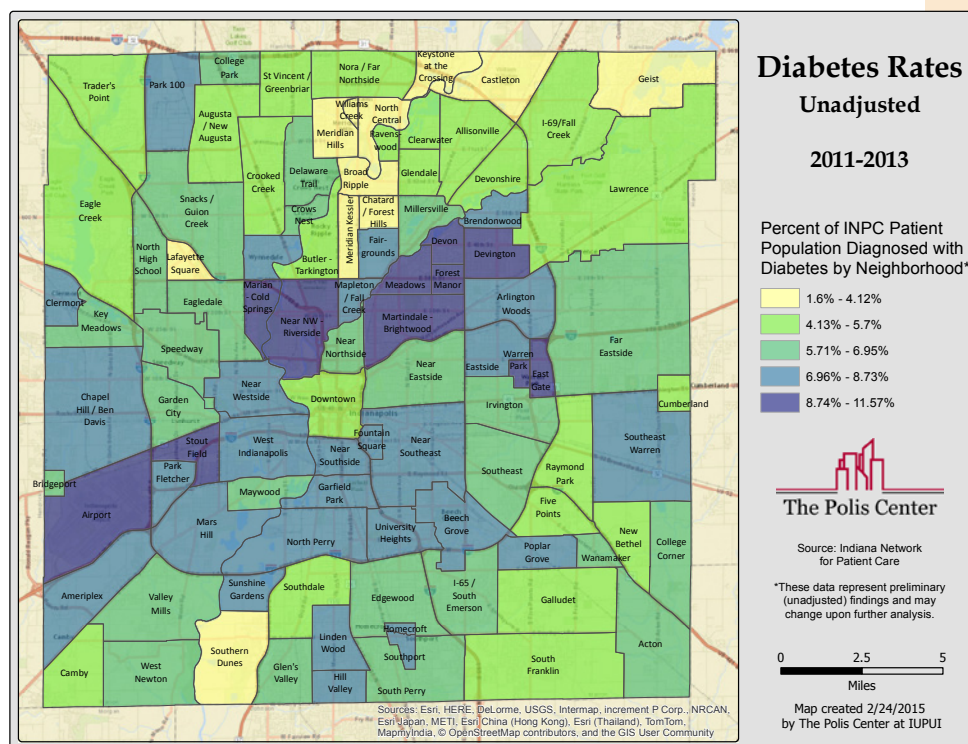
Electronic health records were not developed to measure community health, so Polis and Regenstrief used SAVI to geo-locate the records and link them to community data. The project partners narrowed the set of potential community health indicators to align with the interests of public health stakeholders.

Once they determine what information in the health records will be used to indicate a specific health condition of interest, they can map the data by neighborhood to allow public health departments to learn what diseases affect each community and determine population risk more precisely. Additionally, SAVI's robust data can help reveal what social conditions are present in areas where certain diseases are more prevalent.

Thanks to SAVI and the collaboration among The Polis Center, the Regenstrief Institute, the IU Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health, and the Marion County Public Health Department, Central Indiana is at the forefront of the practice of mapping data for improving public health.

**New SAVI tools are helping researchers and public health professionals in Central Indiana explore geographic, socio-economic, and time trends to develop a clearer picture of chronic disease and its social determinants. Check out SAVI Advanced to explore your own data.**

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